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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes a meeting of local school officials and Head Start directors from across the country to discuss ways to improve children's experience of transition from Head Start to public school. In a keynote address, Sharon Kagan discussed the importance of transitions, the lessons history has taught educators about transitions, and actions educators should take concerning transitions. Four panelists in a panel discussion described the transition components in the early childhood programs they manage, and two educational professionals commented on the panelists' presentations. Meeting participants formed four working groups, each of which discussed: (1) operational, philosophical, and pedagogical barriers at the local level to effective transitions between Head Start programs and public schools; (2) state and local actions that might overcome these barriers, including collaboration between Head Start and public schools, transition initiatives to help families adjust to public schools, parent involvement programs, and improved school curricula; and (3) recommendations to the United States Departments of Education and of Health and Human Services for improving children's transition experiences, including recommendations relating to effective leadership, resources, research, and regulations. (BC)

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DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN FOR PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN HEAD START AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

sponsored by the

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and
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Summary of Meeting, December 3, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

First among the education goals established by the President and the Governors for the Nation is to ensure that, by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn. Joining forces to help make this goal a reality, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have established a task force that is co-chaired by Mary Jean LeTendre, Director of Compensatory Education Programs for ED, and Jeff Rosenberg, Special Assistant to the Commissioner of the Administration for Children, Youth and Families in HHS. The task force has adopted objectives to (1) strengthen transition from Head Start to school; (2) sustain gains made by children in Head Start and other preschool programs during their early years in school; and (3) foster coordination of Head Start with compensatory education programs, especially Chapter 1 Basic Grants and Even Start.

As one in a series of activities designed to achieve the task force objectives, local school officials and Head Start directors from large cities across the country met in Washington, DC, on December 3, 1990, to discuss ways to improve transition from Head Start to public schools. Specifically, they reviewed current practices regarding transition, explored the difficulties local officials encounter in trying to improve transition, and suggested ways to overcome these difficulties.

This report summarizes the day's events, including the morning keynote address and panel discussion as well as the afternoon small group issue sessions. It synthesizes the afternoon discussions of transition issues, specifically delineating problems local administrators encounter and actions they believe they can take to overcome them. Suggestions for further actions by ED and HHS to advance the initiative on transition are also listed.

MORNING SESSION

Welcoming Remarks

Opening the first joint meeting of ED and HHS, Mary Jean LeTendre and Jeff Rosenberg announced the commitment of both Departments to continue forging partnerships for the benefit of the Nation's families and children. Echoing his colleagues, Wade Horn, Commissioner of the Administration for Children, Youth and Families, which administers Head Start, asserted that such a partnership is essential to launching the ambitious Head Start agenda currently planned. Horn cited the largest increases ever in Head Start's budget, for two years running, as evidence of the President's commitment to expand Head Start to reach all eligible children, an effort that would double Head Start enrollment. "We know that Head Start works," said Horn, but he concluded with two specific concerns for the group to address in their afternoon deliberations: Finding effective ways to ease the transition of students from Head Start to the public schools, and helping students maintain the advantage they achieve during preschool programs throughout their public school careers.

"This is probably one of my most thrilling experiences in 30 years in the field [of education]," began Jack MacDonald, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, referring to this first meeting of the joint initiative by ED and HHS to improve transition. Cutting quickly to the day's theme, he noted that, while early intervention is the key to meeting the first national education goal, the burden of readiness ought not fall on children but on schools that must ready themselves to receive and teach all children. Further, he stated, we must build a continuum of appropriate services for children through better articulation among child care services, early childhood education programs, and public schools; recent increases in ED and HHS funds, he suggested, should help to advance this effort.

Charles Kolb, Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, echoed remarks about the special and unique nature of the joint ED-HHS initiative and delivered an assurance of Presidential support for "services integration," or collaboration among different departments and programs. Kolb also presented a brief sketch of the President's belief in and plan to promote accountability and flexibility as essential and inseparable elements of all effective educational programs, including those for young children.

Keynote Address

"How do we make transitions a reality?" inquired Sharon Lynn Kagan, Associate Director of the Bush Center for Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, offering the provocative question as a unifying theme to frame issues and set the tone for the remainder of the day. Kagan addressed this question, and helped the participants shape their own responses to it, by answering three subordinate queries: (1) What are transitions and why are they important? (2) What lessons has history taught us about transitions? (3) What action steps should we take now?

- Transitions

Transitions are important, Kagan posited, because they are the "glue," the actions in one's life that embody continuity. Some transitions, called "vertical transitions" by Kagan, bridge the time spans of one's life. Others, called "horizontal transitions" by Kagan, bridge events that occur at the same time in one's life. Head Start is a pioneer in creating horizontal transitions between social service agencies and preschool. Chapter 1 creates similar linkages between schools and children's homes.

Kagan argued that despite the present efforts of Head Start and Chapter 1, there is a growing need for more effective transitions--transitions between home and school as well as between preschool and school, and among multiple kinds of services as well as among different preschool providers. As evidence of a new zeitgeist for transitions in the 1990s, Kagan identified four societal trends: (1) increased emphasis on home-school linkages coupled with an affirmation that education occurs in many settings; (2) concern for sustaining the gains achieved during early intervention programs through subsequent years of schooling; (3) acknowledged need for a more holistic approach to education as the result of a burgeoning complex of social problems; and (4) a new ethos of collaboration among historically disparate providers of child care and early education in order to avoid competition for scarce resources and promote more effective service delivery.

- History lessons

Kagan began her discussion of history with a brief chronology of the efforts undertaken by leading educators and the Federal Government to promote continuity in education. She reported that although ambiguous findings from national curriculum initiatives such as Follow Through, Planned Variation, and Project Development Continuity failed to produce convincing benefits for children, the findings did suggest that educational continuity involves more than congruence across the curricula of different programs. The findings suggested that in order for transitions to be truly effective, there needs to be continuity of philosophy, pedagogy, and structure across programs.

The 1986 Head Start demonstration projects were particularly helpful, Kagan said, because they identified barriers to effective transition between Head Start and public schools as well as strategies for overcoming those barriers. The identified barriers include: (1) different educational approaches; (2) failure to transfer records and the failure of principals to forward transferred records to teachers; (3) inability of some parents to interact effectively with the schools; (4) inability of Head Start children to meet the demands placed on them by public schools; and (5) hostile and patronizing attitudes of both agencies toward one another. Strategies proved effective in overcoming some barriers include:

(1) development of written transfer agreements between Head Start and public schools that delineate the roles and responsibilities of each program; (2) transfer of individual student records from Head Start to the public schools; (3) transition activities for parents that span the school year; (4) advocacy training for parents; and (5) visits by Head Start and public school teachers to one another's programs and classrooms.

This history has left us, continued Kagan, three categories of lessons: strategic--how we act; empirical--how we evaluate; and conceptual--how we think about transition. The strategic lessons teach us that isolated transition activities don't make a difference; we must conceive comprehensive transition plans that include important follow-up activities. For example, discussions about transition must be followed with classroom visits by teachers, parents, and students. And such transition activities, continued Kagan, will be most effective if parents are actively involved. Finally, transfer of student records is important, especially if they help teachers gain important information about children's learning styles, accomplishments, interests, and needs; transfer of records is not helpful if the records are used to stigmatize Head Start children.

History's empirical lessons teach us, said Kagan, that it has been difficult to evaluate transition efforts largely because there is no single, common definition of what they are. In addition, many transition efforts are not fully implemented, making them difficult to assess. Other research problems, such as incomparable treatment or control groups and mobility of both teachers and students, have also impeded the studies. The result is that we don't empirically know how transition efforts affect children.

Finally, the conceptual lesson offered by history is that past transition efforts lacked a guiding framework and a conceptual certainty about what transition meant. The results, said Kagan, were well-intended, but narrowly conceived and superficially implemented efforts that, not surprisingly, never attained the systemic changes in attitudes and institutional structures that we now recognize as vital to achieving continuity across educational programs.

- Action plan

Two strategies for change are necessary, said Kagan, a shared vision and action steps. The shared vision must embrace continuity of philosophy--how children develop and the role of the teacher in that process; pedagogy--alignment of instructional systems, including strategies and attention to individual learning styles and rates; and structure--levels of staff training, credentials, salaries, pupil-teacher ratios, and program regulations. The attendant action steps suggested by Kagan are to: (1) establish a planning committee of Head Start and public school staff to set goals for the transition initiative; (2) involve the community and other social service providers in developing and implementing transition initiatives; (3) encourage policy makers to examine barriers to effective transition between Head Start and public schools; and (4) ask the Federal Government to make a long-term commitment to support transition efforts with funds, high expectations, and research activities.

In closing, Kagan submitted that our process for change must be clear. Furthermore, we must get beyond "band-aid remedies" for problems and address structural, philosophical, and pedagogical challenges. Like all worthwhile endeavors, she said, it will take time, persistence, and energy.

Panel Discussion on Components of Coordination

Willie Epps, Head Start Project Director at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, discussed the importance of parent training in his program. Disturbed by parents' reluctance to participate in public schools as readily as they had in Head Start, Epps decided to augment his regular transition training program for parents with "Steps to Excellence for Personal Success" (published by Pacific Institute, Inc.), a program that helps parents break communication barriers, improve their self-esteem, and set personal goals.

Epps's transition program includes a two-day orientation/training (STEP) and seven sessions, offered monthly throughout the school year, to address the following topics: (1) Communicating with school personnel; (2) Volunteering in the public schools; (3) Approaching the schools; (4) Interacting with teachers and administrators; (5) Informing parents of their rights; (6) Informing parents of their responsibilities; and (7) Interpersonal and group interaction skills. The program also provides each parent with a "transition packet" at the end of the school year along with training on how to present the packet to his or her child's kindergarten teacher.

Since the training program's initiation, Epps has documented increased parent participation and volunteerism in Head Start, higher enrollment in GED classes, and fewer Head Start children being placed in the Chapter 1 transitional classroom upon entry into public schools. Epps plans a follow-up study to assess the training program's effects on the involvement of participating parents in the public schools their children later attend.

Yolanda Garcia, Director of the Children's Services Department of the Santa Clara County Office of Education in San Jose, California, described the coordination and transition efforts involving Head Start and public schools in Santa Clara County. Important structural features that facilitate transition, she noted, are that some school districts in the county operate preschools and some preschool classes are located on public school sites. In addition, local administrators act as "enablers" to oversee and validate transition efforts. Interagency planning councils, established by some districts to represent the diverse services schools provide, increase local opportunity to coordinate programs and services targeted to young children and their families. In closing, Garcia offered three guiding principles for transition initiatives. The transition process must be formalized; it must include support for teachers who need time, energy, training, and materials; and it must involve parents.

Cynthia Morrell, Principal of McDonogh 15 Creative Arts Magnet School in New Orleans, Louisiana, described her school and its success in facilitating the transitions of young children through their first years in school. Founded in 1970 by parents who wanted a neighborhood school for their children, McDonogh 15 is based on the British Infant School System, in which students are placed by teachers in developmentally appropriate classrooms; bi-annual conferences bring teachers, parents, and children together to set goals for the school year; and narrative reports rather than letter grades inform parents of their children's progress. In 1980, with their own funds, McDonogh 15 parents began the parent cooperative prekindergarten that provides before- and after-school care in addition to a full-day program. A second prekindergarten class has since been added with Head Start funds. Morrell cited five keys to the school's success with young children: (1) By virtue of having started it, parents feel great responsibility for the school's success. (2) Prekindergarten children are an integral part of the student body. (3) McDonogh is small and has no admissions criteria, thus it excludes no one. (4) New Orleans' French Quarter, in which McDonogh is located, has a wealth of resources to augment classroom learning activities. (5) The school doors are open to parents before, during, and after the regular school day.

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Gloria Guzman, Assistant Principal of PS 9 in the Bronx, New York, stressed the need for continuity in the education of young children and the importance of acknowledging and addressing the needs of parents whose children are about to enter kindergarten. "A Room to Grow" was a demonstration project in which PS 9's teachers and students developed a curriculum to integrate subject area skills and knowledge through activities in the classrooms' many learning centers. An annual open house still welcomes Head Start and other parents to school and engages them in all the learning center activities that will be available to their children in the PS 9 kindergarten. Additionally, a two-day workshop called "Foundations of Reading and Writing" teaches parents how to share literature with their children as a way of building language skills at home.

Reactors

John Love, Senior Research Associate for RMC Corporation in Hampton, New Hampshire, adopted Kagan's organizational framework to structure his comments about the panelists' presentations. Continuity in philosophy, pedagogy, and structure, he posited, will be the key elements of any action plan for effective transitions. A common and cohesive philosophy, the overarching principle, will be concretely manifest in (1) public school teachers' trust in the judgments and recommendations made by Head Start staff about individual students; (2) continuity in school and classroom climate; and (3) compatible conceptions of and approaches to "readiness." Pedagogical continuity, Love proposed, has two dimensions--the nature and content of instruction as well as the consistency of instruction. Instruction must be, he said, developmentally appropriate at all grade levels, not just during the preschool years. Finally, Love said, any discussion of structural continuity must acknowledge that services integration is a local as well as Federal issue; that effective transitions for young children involve the entire early childhood block, from preschool through the primary grades; and that advanced planning for evaluation, which includes thinking of outcomes in concrete terms, is essential to test the efficacy of all educational strategies.

Sam Sava, Executive Director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in Alexandria, Virginia, cited a number of sobering national statistics about growing poverty, inadequate health care, and high infant mortality rate to amplify his message that we must act now to improve the ailing condition of life and education for the country's children. Sava's call to action included six suggestions: (1) Dispel the myth that true education begins in high school and that early intervention is child's play. (2) Reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in primary grades to 15:1. (3) Raise Head Start salaries to make them competitive with those of the public schools. (4) Train principals and teachers to become comfortable with and responsive to the needs of young children. (5) Change the reward system in schools by eliminating improved test scores as the sole measure of success. (6) Market schools to community leaders in order to garner support and resources for public education. Sava recommended the NAESP publication entitled "Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children: Early Childhood Education and the Elementary School Principal" to all participants, and suggested that they, in turn, recommend it to their principals.

AFTERNOON SESSION

During the afternoon, participants worked in four groups to address issues presented by ED and HHS in the form of discussion questions. A facilitator and recorder worked with each group. The following is a synthesis of the discussions of all four groups, organized into three areas: (1) local barriers to effective transition; (2) State and local actions to overcome barriers; and (3) recommendations for further action by ED and HHS. Main points are listed in order of the frequency of the comment.

Local barriers to effective transition

- Structural and operational barriers between Head Start and public school
  - Competition for resources, space, and children
  - Disparate decision-making processes, bureaucratic procedures, salary schedules, program regulations, and licensing requirements
  - Lack of communication at local and State levels about the missions and goals of both programs
- Philosophical barriers between Head Start and public schools
  - Different philosophies about how children learn and the appropriate role of the teacher in the teaching-learning process
  - Public school staff's lack of trust in and respect for the knowledge, opinions, and contributions of Head Start staff and parents
- Pedagogical barriers between Head Start and public schools
  - Disparate expectations for the achievement and behavior of young children as reflected in dramatically different curricula
  - Tension between the public schools' emphasis on covering content and raising achievement test scores and Head Start's emphasis on developmentally appropriate curriculum and well-adjusted children
- Resource barriers to achieving the first national goal that all children will start school ready to learn
  - Inadequacy of services to meet basic human needs, such as nutrition, housing, and the physical and mental health care of pregnant women as well as young children and their families
  - Lack of good models for easing the transition of children and parents from Head Start to public schools

State and local actions to overcome barriers

- Collaboration between Head Start and public schools
  - Hold joint meetings at the local level to establish strong lines of communication and improve each program's understanding of the other's mission, objectives, and operations
  - Establish and publicize incentives for collaboration

- Establish full-time positions at State and local levels to develop, implement, and coordinate transition initiatives that involve both programs

- Encourage Head Start and public school representatives to join one another's policy councils

- Encourage State boards of education to take a leadership role in placing transition issues at the top of the State agenda

- Transition initiatives to help families adjust to public schools and help children maintain the momentum they achieve from their preschool experience

  - Coordinate all services available to young children and their families in order to provide continuous support during transition from Head Start to public schools

  - Discuss readiness in terms of schools providing appropriate and comprehensive services to meet the needs of all children, not in terms of children changing to meet standardized expectations of schools; frame transition initiatives in terms of modifying institutions and coordinating resources, not "fixing" children

  - Work with State and local specialists of early childhood education to appropriately define "readiness" and help reshape public schools' expectations for the learning behaviors of young children

  - Organize training sessions and meetings for all public school staff to learn about the purposes and operations of early childhood education programs

  - Provide transition orientation sessions for preschoolers about to enter kindergarten

  - Reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in kindergarten classes and/or place preschoolers in smaller public schools that house only the primary grades

- Parent involvement programs that facilitate transition from Head Start to public schools

  - Design a cooperative transition program for parents that involves staff and other resources from both Head Start and public schools

  - Conduct joint parent training sessions throughout the school year

  - Train public school staff to work closely and effectively with parents; training should help school staff (1) understand the role Head Start parents have learned to assume in the education of their children, (2) build a rapport with parents that is based on common concern for children, and (3) improve parents' self-images

- Refocus the public schools' parent involvement programs by limiting informational sessions on rules and regulations and increasing opportunities for parents to participate meaningfully in the education and care of their children

- Establish a public school program to deal with the needs of families, not just school children

- Improved school curricula

  - Encourage institutions of higher education to teach a modern and cohesive syllabus of child development and early childhood education issues to teachers and administrators, in order to provide them with a firm theoretical base for designing developmentally appropriate curricula

  - Establish a forum for Head Start and public school staff to discuss their respective curricula and the philosophical underpinnings of each, and to resolve the perceived conflict between teaching developmentally appropriate curriculum and raising educational achievement

  - Ensure that public school curricula are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive for all children

  - Modernize public school curricula at all levels to cover skills and knowledge that today's children need to function in their world outside of school, including the workplace

Recommendations for further action by ED and HHS

- Leadership

  - Inform State and local educators of the prominence of early childhood education on the national agenda; continue the national collaboration effort between ED and HHS and make it public--correspondence on joint letterhead will motivate State and local educators to take similar actions

  - Establish a national task force to develop guidelines for local transition initiatives

- Resources

  - Increase funds so that both Head Start and the public schools can better meet the needs of families, not just children

  - Help fund: (1) local transition initiatives; (2) State coordinators in charge of transition; and (3) local design of developmentally appropriate curricula

  - Fund fewer demonstration projects in order to adequately fund well-defined and replicable projects for longer periods of time

- Research and dissemination
  - Disseminate information about effective transition initiatives
  - Host more meetings and training sessions to facilitate communication between Head Start and public schools
  - Help document the positive effects of Head Start, including the improved physical and emotional health of families as well as the development of children's social, cognitive, and psycho-motor skills; conduct a study of "fade-out" effects for Head Start children who attend effective elementary schools compared to those for students who attend less effective schools
  - Promote investigation of the effects on transition of differences in program structure between Head Start and public schools, including salary schedules, class size, and operating philosophy

- Regulations
  - Examine regulatory barriers (e.g., different teacher training requirements and facility licensing codes) to collaboration between Head Start and public schools
  - Broaden ED's narrow focus on academic instruction to include comprehensive services (e.g., health, nutrition, clothing) for families
  - Include provisions for transition training in the regulations for the recently passed day-care bill
  - Work with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to access vacant buildings for use as Head Start facilities

CLOSING SESSION

Following reports from each of the four working groups, Jeff Rosenberg provided closing remarks, noting that participants had indeed helped to clarify the first national education goal and what it means to "prepare children for schools, and schools for children." A number of important issues had emerged, he said, including that effective transition is essential for parents as well as children, successful transition will mean systemic change, and local communities may need additional resources to help develop collaborative transition efforts between Head Start and public schools. Addressing a possible misconception, Rosenberg agreed that Head Start personnel are generally inadequately compensated, but pointed out that it is inaccurate to suggest salary differentials are causing a decline in the quality of programs nationwide. In fact, he said, HHS has targeted several hundred million dollars over the last five years for salary enhancement. Rosenberg went on to mention future collaborative activities between ED and HHS. Thanks to the second, consecutive large increase in Head Start funding, he noted, HHS will spend $20 million this fiscal year, and each year thereafter for three additional years, to support local transition projects. A national seminar will be held in the spring and a research conference in the summer. Finally, the two Departments will review the recommendations provided from this meeting to develop future plans.